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Finland Lies about a Historic Suffrage Achievement Really? Finland? Yup.

By Mark W. Powell¹

What country first allowed women to stand in national parliamentary elections? Australia, in 1902, the year after the Commonwealth's formation. (And for anyone under a rock recently, Australia in June swore in its first female prime minister.) Finland so elevated its women (all of them, it claims) in 1906. But Finland officially claims the title outright.

Why? Ask Finland, which you'd think wouldn't lie or feel the need to, and refuse to right itself later. After all it was recently rated world's best country, not even without cause, by Newsweek. (Newsweek has its own factual problems, sometimes spectacular, in history, geography, science and math -- but all I've seen came from incompetence, not lying, save perhaps its October 2008 claim that DNA tests simply proved that Thomas Jefferson procreated with Sally Hemings, when it maybe knew better. But my Newsweek sample will appear in another outlet).

I've repeatedly remonstrated with the Finns, twice face-to-face and twice by e-mail last spring with the cultural counselor in Washington, D.C., then in October face-to-face with the deputy chief of mission. Counselor Pekka Hako obfuscated, temporized, finally went silent. The embassy #2, Anne Lammila, dispensed with such tactics. She brazenly acknowledged the lie as government "policy" and said "It's not your place" to cite historical facts to Finland, let alone request correction -- both appalling declarations that facts are not facts but toys of politics. Yeah, who am I, or you or anyone, to ask the world's best country to tell truth?

Researching this isn't hard. Typical Australian sites addressing the issue include these:

<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/politics/women/>
<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/Pubs/RN/2000-01/01rn23.pdf>

Here's what one (<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=4105>) says:

"In 1902 Australia became the first nation to nationally grant women the right to vote and the right to stand for parliament in national elections [...]The next country to allow women to stand was Finland, and by 1919 it had elected 19 women to the Eduskanta, the Finnish national parliament. By contrast, in Australia it took nearly 20 years before the first woman was elected to a state parliament."

¹ Powell, of Arlington, Va., is a journalist of wide credits including columns in nearly all the top 50 U.S. and many major Canadian newspapers in the 1990s. This century he's specialized in documenting factual errors and response behaviors from major media and other educational outlets including museums, memorials, universities, and occasionally politicians.

As Australia also admits, "Franchise of Indigenous Australians at the federal level was not universal until 1962." 1902's grant was to nearly all, but not all, women (not to mention native men). Australia tells the truth, including properly crediting Finland for jumping quickly ahead, and noting Australia's slowness to realize the right it was first to create.

Further, Finland was, hello, still under Tsarist Russia in 1906, declaring independence in 1917 -- a country in spirit and culture, no doubt, but not in fact. Not only did Australia precede Finland in granting national female election rights, but it was a genuinely autonomous, self-governing democratic country at the time, however strong remained ties to Britain, the original modern parliamentary democracy.

Further deepening Australia's claim, "The self-governing colony of South Australia granted both universal suffrage and allowed women to stand for the colonial parliament in 1895." South Australia, with Adelaide, was never a penal colony and granted limited female voting rights as early as 1861. And while the Grand Duchy of Finland had more autonomy than other parts of Russia, it was from 1899 generally under Tsarist repression called Russification -- hardly more self-governing than 1895 South Australia, even during a 1905-07 reassertion (including the 1906 voting law) taking advantage of Russia's 1905 setback against Japan.

Regarding excluding a minority from voting/election, it also bears note that Finland's ethnic and cultural divide with its extremely tiny Sami minority is hardly as severe and tragic as what European Australians have and have had with Aboriginals (who at Confederation represented less than 4 percent of population). Still, Finland admits having been quite hard on them in some ways at least congruent with much of Australia's past with Aboriginals, as noted at sites such as <http://www.suri.ee/eup/samis.html>.

Here are samples what it officially says, even after my and who-knows-who-else's objections. From Finland's London embassy:

"Women in Finland were the first in the world to be eligible to stand as candidates in national elections."

(<http://www.finemb.org.uk/public/default.aspx?contentid=160386&contentlan=2&culture=en-GB>)

And "Published by the Finland Promotion Board [and] Published by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs":

"In 1906 Finland's national assembly, the Eduskunta, became the first parliament in the world to adopt full gender equality" -- verbatim-identical to the third sentence in the previously cited page. Immediately continuing: "It earned that distinction by granting equally to men and women the right not only to vote but also to stand for election."

(<http://finland.fi/Public/default.aspx?contentid=160111>)

Finland deserves much honor, in multiple spheres. All should admire its heroic resistance to Soviet invasion and prodigious modern progress. Long joining Scandinavian sisters in leading the world in female political representation, it got a woman president (still serving) in 2000, a female PM in 2003 (she served briefly, with a half-female cabinet); and today again has a woman PM.

So, rightly owning such sociopolitical distinction, why lie to grab more, let alone at

expense of Australia and history? Finland could proudly claim something like, "Finland, aspiring to independence from Russia, was the second nation to grant women right of election, after Australia. It was first to so enfranchise all women, and first to have women elected." But it chooses a lie, despite and/or because of its admirable true record. And that truly enters psychology's realm. One point here among others is that nobody's perfect. If we define Finnishness as good, at least some un-Finnish things happen in Finland, such as, say, 2007's and 2008's school massacres.

I first encountered Finland's false claim from Hako, addressing an embassy crowd for a film developed from Finnish, uh, mythology. I first challenged him there, my mistake being to respect him by waiting for a private talk rather than questioning from the floor.

Hako's genial evasion and even Lammila's gross but cool and controlled statements not only didn't deny factual error, but didn't get heated or abusive. Hako didn't even ban me from part 2 of "The Age of Iron" a week later. This contrasts behavior from other embassies (not to mention media, which inform 99-plus percent of my studies of this type) when identifying their factual errors of history, geography, science and math -- "mere" errors of incompetence and negligence coming "just" from the embassies, rather than governmental lies.

Consider the tableau of mania against admission and correction, using just my tiny sample of a niche set to begin with, embassies:

In 2008 Canada's embassy had an ethical-mental breakdown, using the U.S. Secret Service to stake out my bicycle to serve a banning notice after I reported a featured exhibit's factual errors in major Canadian papers -- only after the embassy angrily and without explanation refused private correction requests for which it should have thanked me. I told staff what I'd do in response -- report -- but they seemed to not care, any more than that I'd been an admirer of Canada in the leading papers of both countries for 20 years. But they cared, majorly and nastily, when I reported.

Britain's embassy got ugly in 2009 when I asked correction of a single online educational-page error, about first man in space Yuri Gagarin's orbital apogee. Like Canada's, it didn't dispute error but refused correction, despite cordial discussion with embassy #2 Dominick Chilcott's right hand. I guess Chilcott, like the Canadians, said Hell no we're not correcting any error.

While America's and Australia's mother and sister countries disgraced themselves, Finland's neighbor Sweden did better, at least after a while. Its riverfront embassy likes to mount exhibits, a nice thing. When I flagged a bunch of history and polar-science errors in 2007, staff angrily refused to discuss them. A year later the head of administration intervened, admitted the errors, corrected those still on display (including sending to Sweden for a least one pre-fab panel), wrote me an honest letter and asked me to keep visiting and examining. Again, human and organizational psychology: What is so hard about such a sane, responsible response on factual error?

Whatever it is, it is. It's so pervasive and deep-seated that even others' errors that should concern embassies are held inviolate, if the errant sources are too valuable to upset. In 2010 the Netherlands and New Zealand embassies, up to and including the deputy chiefs of mission, refused to address rafts of errors about their countries in top American travel sources -- things you'd think they'd want to at least ask the publishers to correct. (The Netherlands offender I saw, Fodor's, makes a show just inside its covers of asking for corrections, but is silent when lists of

hard factual ones are presented.) Each embassy promised contact that never came, then refused even simple private factual acknowledgment for my files.

In the Dutch case this followed an incredible hour-plus of loud personal invective from deputy chief of mission Gerard van der Wulp, most of it simply smokescreen against saying why a specific written promise of consultation with the plenipotentiary for Aruba was broken. Even after that outburst, van der Wulp promised in writing to investigate and address that matter with me. He made no further contact.

And what of media -- not even touching their own grave defects, but their willingness to expose such as Finland's lie? Even I was surprised by across-the-board mass-market refusal, which seems to boil down to disinterest in history and reluctance to call out "cool" Finland.

Least surprising, still shameful, was Finland's Helsingin Sanomat, Scandinavia's biggest paper. It commiserated by sharing its own stubborn, failed effort to get Canada's national weekly Maclean's to correct a truly lunatic claim that "About 10 million Finns died under Lenin, almost half due to starvation." (Lenin never ruled Finland, and Finns numbered about 3 million in 1917.) But similarly call out Finland itself? Forget it.

More surprising, all Australian major-metro papers and the national Australian declined, though some praised my work. Australia's embassy in Washington also declined, noting its U.S.-focused mission (though the deputy chief did manage to thank me for correcting several errors in the embassy website, seen at a glance).

I thought Australia's diplomatic mission for Finland, based in Sweden, might care to defend Australian honor and simple truth. After repeated written pledges to open contact on the issue, it didn't. Given the Stockholm basing, I asked the friendly Swedish deputy chief of mission to try to facilitate contact. She tried, and couldn't. It's sad that it took an academic journal to publish this, and good that such outlets exist.